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# WOMAN OF SUBSTANCE

## Dr. Annapoorna Moharana



The women of Orissa have played a significant role in all phases of national movement. They had made momentous contribution to the freedom struggle by demonstrating their indomitable courage and unflinching patriotism. But Gandhiji was the chief architect of women's participation in the National Movement. Because he, for the first time, involved women in the freedom struggle and gave a new dimension to it.

Gandhiji visited Orissa, for the first time, on 23rd March 1921. Before addressing a public meeting in Cuttack City on that day, he spoke to a small gathering of Oriya women at separately. That was the first public meeting Oriya women had ever attended and that was also the first occasion where a great political leader of Gandhiji's stature addressed them separately. Never before Oriya women had this kind of experience nor had they been given so much importance by any other leader earlier.

Sarala Devi had the distinction of being the first lady of Orissa to face imprisonment for participating in the National Movement. In the first phase of civil disobedience movement six ladies including Sarala Devi, Rama Devi, Malati Devi, Chandramani Devi, Sunamani Devi and an old lady of Balasore district were jailed. However, during Quit India Movement more than twenty Oriya women were imprisoned.

Harijan movement began towards the end of 1932. Rama Devi played a pioneering role in the Harijan movement and about fifteen ladies carried out the anti-untouchability work under her leadership. During this phase Rama Devi realized that as mother, woman has a great role to play in the society and awakening of the country was impossible without arousing the maternal force. **Rama Devi** along with eleven ladies took part in Gandhiji's Harijan Padayatra which began from Puri on 9th May 1934. Gandhiji remarked in appreciation, *"I have marveled at the manner in which Smt. Rama Devi and her girls have discharged themselves during the tour. These ladies have not known what fatigue is. There was naturalness about all they did which show that they have been trained to bear hardship ...."*

Annapoorna, born on 3rd November 1917, was the second child of **Smt. Rama Devi** and Shri Gopabandhu Choudhury. The Choudhury family was famous for their aristocracy, wealth, and her grand father Gokulananda Choudhury who was a famous lawyer and politically powerful person. Rama Devi was second daughter Gopalballav Das and niece of the legendary Utkal Gaurab Madhusudhan Das, the architect of modern Orissa.

The Choudhury family underwent a cultural and social transformation when Nabakrushna married Malati (Sen) who she met at Santi Niketan. Malati came from a very elite Bramho aristocratic family and had grown up at Santiniketan and was a favourite pupil of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. She was an excellent player of Beena, and an exponent of Rabindra Sangeet; trained as a dancer by Gurudev.

Annapoorna and her elder brother Manmohan could explore new horizons in culture, art and music. Annapoorna had a good training of Sitar and vocal music under Ustad Khanu Mian and she adapted Rabindra Sangeet. Thus the children of Choudhury's were brought up in the confluence of Tagore's cultural heritage and Gandhiji's spiritual and moral values. The brother and sister have amply

demonstrated their commitments to Gandhian way of life through their deeds and their aesthetic senses and contributions to creative writings. When they moved to *Alaka Ashram* near Jagatsinghpur Annapoorna disciplined herself to Ashram way of life, spinning with Charkha, participating in social work and assisting freedom fighters in their revolutionary works. She memorized the entire Bhagvat Geeta at the age of twelve and she had very enchanting voice.

While very young, Annapoorna participated in picketing persuading customers to boycott liquors and foreign goods. Scores of young boys deserted schools to participate in the movement and they were called *'Banara Sena'*. It is during the salt Satyagraha that Annapoorna tasted the prison life of the British India when she was detained for selling salt made from the Bay of Bengal, although this hospitality was very short lived. She also participated in the historic *Harijan Pada Yatra* of Gandhiji from Puri to Bhadrak. Gopabandhu, Rama Devi, Manmohan, Annapoorna and a number of freedom fighters accompanied Gandhiji during this march.

During 1932-34 movements entire Choudhury family had been imprisoned one time or another. In 1934, Gopabandhu, Rama Devi and Annapoorna, with several other freedom fighters, decided to set up the *Seva Ghar Ashram* at Bari. Gopabandhu had visited Bari when he was a second officer (posted at Jajpur) during one of those menacing floods and then refused to write a toned down report of the calamity when his superior pressurized him. Subsequently, he resigned from his service. Now they started a new phase of life, living under impoverished conditions but their life style was at the same level as of the lowest economic strata of people in Bari. The villagers of Bari and surrounding areas began to understand the ideology behind all the constructive works and the essence of the Gandhian philosophy. *Seva*

*Ghar* became a hub for the freedom movement and Gandhiji's constructive programs.

Annapoorna was active in many fronts. She took part in visiting Harijjan localities and educating them, worked among the women and took part in Basic Education movement. She came in personal contact with Gandhiji and subsequently, she accompanied her father on many occasions to Sevagram, Wardha, to meet Gandhiji. She spent four and half months at Wardha as a teacher trainee in the program for Basic National Education in 1938 under the All India Hindustani Talimi Sangha. She was in charge of a school near Bari after she returned from Wardha. The five years she spent at Bari, from 1934, had its impact since a large number of freedom fighters, men and women of the area joined the independence struggle in subsequent years. She went and lived in Veera Narasinghapur, in Puri district, under the influence of Acharya Harihar Dash for 18 months during 1939-40 where her focus was on social reform.

Annapoorna Choudhury and Sarat Chandra Maharana were married in March 1942 at Bari. The marriage was solemnized by Acharya Harihar Dash. Sarat Chandra was the youngest son of famous literary giant Chandra Mohan Maharana. Sarat Chandra was a brilliant educationist who started his career in the Education Department and had come to Ramachandrapur, when Basic Education was initiated there. He also went to Wardha for the training in Basic Education. They started their new life together at Ramachandrapur. However, Gandhiji had already started thinking of the next and final step of the freedom movement. The Congress workers had already sensed that the future was holding some exciting actions out there. All the important leaders were arrested after Gandhiji gave the clarion call "Do or Die" in August 1942.

**A**nnapoorna has organized 'Shanti Sena' and 'Maran Sena' by then. So was the spirit and mood of the mass that they declared themselves independent which was the case in many part of the country. In the village Kaipada, about 6km from Ramachandrapur, the freedom fighters took siege of the post office, burnt some papers, hoisted the tricolour and declared the independence. A platoon of armed police was sent from Jajpur under the command of an officer. On arrival, they searched some houses and arrested a few people and decided to return to Jajpur with the captured prisoners. Next day, August 26, 1942, was the 'Rakhi Purnima' which turned out to be the day for playing Holi with blood. When news reached Ramachandrapur, the members of the 'Sena' went in the direction of Kaipada. Annapoorna went towards Kaipada accompanied by one person and a young lad. However, she was told on the way that police was going back to Jajpur with the prisoners and would board the boat which was moored near Kalamatia. Annapoorna briskly walked towards the water logged paddy field and saw a crowd and later heard gun shots. On approaching the scene of violence she found one person was lying on a pool of blood oozing from his chest. She tore apart her Sari and tried to bandage the wound but the man passed away. This was display of supreme courage, as a woman alone faced armed forces that had already killed four unarmed persons without any provocations. Both Annapoorna and Sarat Chandra protested against such action. They were arrested. Annapoorna was detained as a security prisoner (without trial) at Cuttack jail for two years from September 2, 1942 and Sarat Chandra was sent to Berhampur jail. When she was released in 1944, was again convicted and sentenced for 4 months for violating the externment order. Finally the 'couple' was united after being separated for almost two and half years. Annapoorna went to spend a few months in *Seva Gram* with Gandhiji.

Annapoorna was involved in the training programs at Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust. The Trust was set up after Kasturba passed away in the Aga Khan Palace when she was imprisoned along with Gandhiji and Mahadev Desai at the onset of 'Quit India' movement. The principal goal of the Trust was to serve Women and Children. In order to achieve this objective a large number of women volunteers were required and they needed suitable training. The Trust undertook the monumental task of social service and reforms especially focused on women and children. Following the ideals of Gandhiji and Kasturba, Anapoorna went to serve in Adivasi areas of Orissa. She played a very important role in organizing activities of the Trust ever since the activities started in Orissa. She has been a Trustee since 1986.

When Vinobaji launched Bhoodan Movement, Sarat Chandra took the responsibility of organizing the activities in Orissa as the Secretary. Annapoorna was left behind at Ramachandrapur with two sons. She also became bread earning member to raise the family since her husband had joined the movement which paid only adequate amount for his maintenance. She undertook translations of Vinobaji's .writing, speeches from Hindi to Oriya which were published in periodicals. She led a very difficult life during these years. However, she joined Bhoodan Pada Yatra from time to time leaving the two children under the care of her sister-in-law, Sumitra Choudhury.

She was invited to teach at the Shanti Seva Vidyalaya in Varanasi where Sarva Seva Sangh had set up a training center to educate young people on the Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence and to resolve social problems and disturbances through non-violent means. Annapoorna herself took a leading role in restoration of peace when a communal riot had broken out in Rourkela, Orissa, in 1964. Moreover, she undertook Pada Yatra in the Chambal valley along with other

Sarvodaya workers in the dacoit infested areas spreading the words of Gandhiji and Vinobaji.

**W**hen her children grew up and were capable of taking care of them, Annapoorna indulged in the Gramdan and Sarvodaya movements more vigorously. She undertook Pada Yatra in Adivasi areas of Orissa and went to other states to join Vinobaji. Kalahandi district of Orissa was very severely affected by drought in 1966 when a number of people died due to starvation. She was involved in relief and rehabilitation works which was undertaken by Sarvodaya Relief Committee and Kasturba Trust. Several young girls were orphaned and the Center of Kasturba Trust at Satyabhamapur (birth place of Madhusudan Das) took care of them. These girls were educated, given vocational training and later lived a dignified life in the society.

**A**nnapoorna was accompanying her aged mother Rama Devi like a shadow wherever she went on whatever missions. One of the most difficult times came when signs of instability became manifested in Pakistan. People of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) initiated struggle for their independence. A very large number of refugees fled to India and became a burden for India. Rama Devi and Annapoorna proceeded to West Dinajpur district, West Bangal, accompanied by Sarat Chandra and several volunteers of Sarvodaya Relief Committee and Kasturba Trust. Their dedicated service and hard work earned them the love and affections of not only the refugees but also the local inhabitants. No sooner Bangadesh war was over than a devastating cyclone struck coastal districts of Orissa. The same group of people who were in West Dinajpur moved swiftly to undertake responsibilities for cremation of the dead, treatments of the villagers and rehabilitation. Funds poured in from all over India for relief work and for reconstruction of houses for those who had no means to build one. The entire group worked relentlessly.

One of the salient features of Annapoorna's character has been to adhere to certain basic principles in life. At nineties now, she is still willing to take all risks, even to stake life, to confront injustice, to struggle for freedom and to stand by the side of the oppressed. It is amply demonstrated in her activities, be it in riot infested town or for the poor Adivasis in tribal belts of Orissa. She has devoted a lot of her time for constructive works in Kalahandi, Koraput, Rayagada and elsewhere.

Annapoorna has enriched Oriya literature considerably. She has translated several books of Gandhiji, Vinobaji, Naraharibhai Parikh from Hindi to Oriya thus making Gandhian philosophy and literature accessible to a large section of Oriyas. Moreover, her writings on nonviolence, freedom movements, and Sarvodaya philosophy have appeared in Oriya periodicals and magazines. In her autobiography *"Annapoorna Amruta Anubhava"* she has presented a vivid picture of the freedom movement and has narrated important events which she witnessed from very close quarters. This book has been awarded with one of the most prestigious prizes of Oriya literature -- The Sarala Puraskar. Other honours conferred on her include: "Utkal Ratna" by Utkal Sahitya Samaj; International Rotary Award; Life Time Achievement Awards by Diwali Ben Charitable Trust, Mumbai and Radhanath Rath Foundation. Besides, she has been felicitated by the President of India on the auspices of "60 Years of Quit India Movement". The Utkal University has conferred on her a honorary **D. Litt** degree.

**Dr. Annapoorna Maharana** is now in her nineties. The edifice of her life is built on four fundamental principles: Ahimsa, Satya, Prem and Karuna. She continues to be active in many ways in spite of her frail health and is widely loved and respected.

**The proposed film would be a tribute to the living legend Dr. Annapoorna Maharana – *a Woman of Substance*.**